

# **COLLECTIVE PERFORMANCE AS PUBLIC ART**

## **Action inside the University of Puerto Rico's Strike**

Edén Bastida Kullick  
Translation: Cristina Fontáñez

### **Key Words:**

Public Art, Politic, Performance, UPR Strike.

### **Abstract**

Public Art arises in almost all cases as an imposition of state devices or by artistic ones, whereas the artistic device is limited to the creation of objects or designs in the service of functionality and aesthetics of the city.

In this essay, actions at the 2010 student strike at the University of Puerto Rico will come under analysis, actions which from our perspective can be easily identified as public art, even if these practices are assumed to be artistic or not since they activate greatly the street as a space for dialogue and relationships. How the concepts of spontaneity and illegality are at the center of this type of organizational practices will be also contemplated.

## ***Introduction***

We already know about the ambiguity behind trying to define public art and the diverse conceptual varieties used to classify it. To do this one could start with the spatial scope in which it develops, to the implications it has for some community in particular. There are many points of view when trying to generalize manifestations on what could be considered “public art”. I went to Puerto Rico eager to see the artistic manifestations that could pertain to the wide scope of public art. Thus, I tried to inquire about the conception of public space, which is already complex and hazy.

What first drove me to this investigation was the socio-political situation of this peculiar “little island”. They have a status difficult, even for its population, to explain: “We are a part, but not really”...something like that...”We are free state but we are associated” (Commonwealth). Free from what? Associated to whom? What does this relationship of Liberty and Association entail and how is it tolerated?

As a valid and necessary first exercise for trying to comprehend the dynamics and social relations, and therefore the political situation of this island, I considered experiencing the street. That is, I attempted to perceive the development and notions of public space. I believe that the fact that Puerto Rico is still a U.S.A. colony (as the U.N. considers it) and at the same time has the essence of a Latin-American country leads me to a lot of questions but very little answers.

By watching different artistic manifestations that take place in San Juan, one could notice an art clearly focused on public space. We find that the majority of public art that is created in San Juan is what Lucy Lippard names *plunk art* (traditional public art of exteriors), which simply enlarges the pieces’ size and, even though it’s placed on a public location, it could be hanged on a gallery just the same. This type of art conceptualizes public space as a transitory place for the piece before it reaches the gallery, usually its real objective. As an example, we mention Isabel Ramírez Pagán’s work; she designs a type of wooden benches and installs them on public plazas or abandoned lots. After that voyage through city exteriors, the pieces are shown in artistic venues. Another interesting example in this line is that of Chemi Rosado’s, who installs a trampoline in a zone near the Dos Hermanos bridge, where groups of kids gather to jump from the bridge to the lagoon. In this type of example one could apply the idea of utility of public art, because the piece serves momentarily for some activity in

coexistence and dialogue. These two examples go along the lines of trying, with the use of aesthetic objects, to produce a social exchange in public space before the piece or its registry ends up in museums or galleries.

On the other side, in San Juan we can observe a huge variety of graffiti wallpapering the city due to collectives and artists with a clear plastic proposition. For example we can mention La Pandilla, Hello Again, Sofia Maldonado, and many others whose are offered walls to paint or are commissioned to “decorate” city walls. I would call these endeavors, so popular now, street murals. In my opinion, for them to be considered graffiti, it has to operate with a certain dose of illegality; because if not, they’re just using graffiti’s language for the creation of murals. I believe that while the skill behind these murals is undeniable, they don’t act as a identity machine for the place on which they are painted on nor do they reflect a clear attitude towards public space.

I sense that when it comes to the perception of public space in Puerto Rico, there is always a notion of individuality; I hear people talk about it as a precise entity of personal circulation. It’s an entity of transition rather than dialogue. Through public space one, or something, circulates from a private or commercial space to another and so on.

Streets don’t serve as a meeting space, there is no social dialogue happening in them. Ideas, reflections or theories about why it’s not used this way are so diverse they shock. It’s said that it’s because of the uncomfortable physical implications of being in a public space, some use the weather as an excuse: “The heat is dense and unbearable. Better go to Plaza” (Plaza Las Américas), a gigantic mall: “The Caribbean’s biggest shopping center”, they say proudly. An immersion in other tropical spots would be an interesting way of researching and comparing the development and notions they have on public space.

Therefore, “the street” in Puerto Rico is a concept too vague to be used for analyzing public art, because in it one can strongly perceive all the processes of experimentation of culture and power, which are intended to keep the population off the street. The intention is to keep everybody inside his or her house or in controlled environments. Social interaction is outright complicated and social organization lives a long and contemplative process.

**a) Dog Food: public art not conceptualized as such.**

On April 2010, the University of Puerto Rico experienced a moment of political convulsion due to a series of measures and budget cuts that the administration tried to implement. These events moved the students to demand a reason for these budget cuts. After not getting any clear or valid answers from the administration, the student body organized a series of protests that lead to an almost two-month long strike.

My paper is mainly focused on the artistic manifestations that resulted from the strike. These, from our perspective, can easily fit into what is considered public art, may them be intended as such or not, because they transform the street into a place of dialogue and relationships. We have to consider Puerto Rico's colonial situation and its population's passive attitude towards events of political nature. Consequently, these pieces emerged as an art of immediacy.

Hal Foster states "Art should intervene directly in culture- understanding culture as a place of conflict and permanent opposition- which is why the systems and apparatus that control cultural representations should be analyzed, *using practices that seek to transform and defy the control systems of symbolic production and the circulation of signification processes*"<sup>1</sup>. *Still, these practices should attempt to achieve a material effectiveness so that they do not become re-appropriated and re-codified interventions inside the massive ideological space of domination.*

The quantity of visual and performance art that emerged from the outbreak of the strike was abundant. They could constantly be seen on the streets surrounding campus, different types of artistic manifestations of interdisciplinary character that went from graphic and paint to performances. These had as a sole purpose to support students protesting the university's administration; the street was reestablished as a collective conscience generating space.

The Payapolicías (Clown Police), Colectivo Papel Machete, Agua, Sol y Sereno, Jóvenes del 98, Sembrando Conciencia and other artistic collectives, together with the rest of the population that showed up everyday, revived the space for artistic experimentation. They achieved to transform the street into that aspirational entity in which people create continuously. They reached dialogue and established a direct protest towards an issue of national concern. It wasn't an issue of a minority, as the university authorities vociferated, claiming that it was just a matter of a few young

---

<sup>1</sup> FOSTER HAL. *Recodings, Art, Spectacle and Culture Politics*. Seattle: Bay Press 1986.

parasites that had nothing to do since they didn't study or work and lived off of U.S. welfare.

Even with the very diverse manifestations born from the strike, I would like to focus this paper on the relationship between performance and public sphere that resulted from said events; how, in this particular case, student protesters and even the rest of the population that supported their cause used artistic language to establish a specific dialogue about the befall of the struggle; how is public space experienced in this colonized nation.

The difference was marked with the traditional vision of a performance piece that constitutes a temporal piece made mostly by plastic artists. These pieces are almost always executed by and individual artist and lean to the production of events instead of objects; the analyzed piece goes along the lines of a collective action without any artistic intent, with the sole objective of protesting against repressive measures. Performance is seen as a form of expression that takes place in a public space and that has the purpose of questioning the practices and symbols that structure communal living.<sup>2</sup>

Performance emerges in the 60's in the middle of tremendous social and political turmoil. Therefore, it transforms into a tool for direct protest against social processes, and also into contempt towards the art market and the artistic object as a commercial product. Producing actions in place of the typical artistic object go against commercialization and consequently they would not be of interest to institutional business. The collective performance that we will analyze goes along another ideological line, we could say that it because it doesn't have any artistic pretention and doesn't have any intention whatsoever of introducing itself in the art market.

With these types of collective performances we can observe the possibility of the subjects taking charge of public spaces still unconquered by hegemonic principles; also they view public sphere not as a static dimension but as a device for generating a space of critical production of popular opinion.<sup>3</sup>

The strike advanced while April came to an end. One day, like many other during this struggle, a group of parents and community members arrived at the main gate of

---

<sup>2</sup>DIAMOND, ELIN. *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, London, 1996.

<sup>3</sup>ARATO, ANDREW and COHEN, JEAN. *Public Sphere and Social and Civil Societa in Metapolitics*, vol. 3, N° 9. 1999. pp. 37

campus -which was covered by riot police- with the intention of giving supplies and food to the students occupying the university campus. Police reaction was violent: the parents were denied the right to give food to their children and tensions escalated to the point where one parent was assaulted. The next day, a group of people arrived at the university gates, which were still under riot police guard, and started putting plates of dog food next to each policeman. Afterwards, they went around with a giant sack of dog food and began filling each plate. They finished their protest by putting signs next to the policemen that read "Beware of the dog". This action, spontaneously born after the day the riot police impeded the delivery of food to the students, clearly shows a renovation in performance style: a group of people, unidentified, acted in a way heavily charged with dissenting attitude.

This creative action sought to articulate political symbols in the street and looked for both cultural and artistic aspects of the piece to become a protest tool in a political device that uses symbols of everyday life to generate new social symbols. It is a piece that takes representations and meanings of everyday life and uses them as cultural elements pertaining to a new hegemony yet to be achieved.<sup>4</sup>

This piece was extremely clear in its use of symbols. Symbols were managed with the purpose of transforming the official connotations of elements of the state (i.e. the police). Their creation parted from a symbolism easily identifiable: the food that was denied to the students. In this case food wasn't denied, it was given to "those two-legged animals".

From my point of view, this rudimentary collective action of feeding someone who the day before denied someone food constitutes a hard ideological blow. Sadly, the press and even a part of society felt that it had crossed the line, this is a society which still believes in unquestionable respect for public servants and where "the police deserve respect, they protect us"<sup>5</sup>. What in other places could have turned into a more direct attack, both verbally and physically, against the repressive forces of the state, in this geographical point people acted with exemplary subtlety without dismembering its message.

---

<sup>4</sup>**DAGNINO, EVELINA.** *Culture, Citizenship and Democracy: New Discourses and Changing Practices in Latinamerican Left* in Arturo Escobar, Sonia Álvarez and Evelina Dagnino *Cultural Politics and the Culture of Politics. A view of Latinamerican Social Movements*. Taurus, Madrid, 2001. pp.57.

<sup>5</sup>Phrase commonly heard from the population.

This performance revealed connections between everyday life and politics by using simple and common elements: it demonstrated that the construction of a new subject could very well originate from such a radical symbolic interpretation. A change in the nation's collective conscience was caused by such a simple act as giving dog food to some policemen.

Moreover, this action turned the public sphere into a space of interaction where there was a real manifestation against a repressive act; since it was of participative character, its goal wasn't the production of objects or registry elaboration, as generally happens in protest art. This piece tried to convey what we could call a "mirror effect" (they did it to us, we do it to them), while at the same time demonstrating society's indignation towards a repressive action from the day before.

These new forms of protest are necessary and it's not just about generating a social revolt but also of starting to produce an alternative sense of action<sup>6</sup>. The piece came to creatively reinvent protest by constructing different politic-artistic strategies and redesigning the path step by step. The idea is that the protagonists achieve, on way or another is to artistically politicize public space and turn it into a space for socialization and construction of consensus. Different mechanisms have to be thought of in order to propose social change in a more fluid way. This can be attained with small developments that inspire small groups and later become large events that lead to big changes.<sup>7</sup>

The value of this performance lies in the symbolic disobedience towards the authoritative world and in the metaphorical intensity that its signs achieved to articulate in the collective imaginary. These actions are no longer pieces: they live a process of creation-dismemberment in terms of the creating individual because they don't have defined authors and the essence of the performance lies in the interactions product of said action.

## **b) Illegality in artistic processes**

The previously described episode had some traces of illegality, for some, because there

---

<sup>6</sup>REVILLA, MARISA. *The Concept of Social Movement: Action, Identity and Sense in Political Institutions and Society*. Grompone, Romeo (editor). IEP, Lima, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> JORDAN JOHN's words. Member of Reclaim the Streets collective in the "Metropolis" episode: Art and Activism. Televisión Española. 2010.

was a kind of obstruction of a public road and sidewalk; and because there was a direct offense or insult directed to a public servant: the police force, in this case. To this matter, I go back to John Cage's words, who defined art as a criminal act, art as a serious offense. As a delinquent activity, art can prove that government has no right to exist. This is what exactly happened with the police; apart from them not doing their job, they repressed and prohibited.

The difficulty to overcome with these artistic pieces rooted in contestation is that they generally end up encapsulated in an artistic palace (museums). There, their radical force slowly weakens. Art, as it breaks the law, proves that government entities are totally superfluous and that they can be destructed. But, as Nelson Rivera states, this labor of destruction concerns general population, not just a group of artist.

Oscar Ianni<sup>8</sup> mentions that the act of breaking the law in Puerto Rico is something more than an everyday occurrence. He calls it "horizontal violence" and uses common actions as examples: shouting while driving or running a red light. There are more extreme examples like gang violence and murder. I agree with Ianni in that there are some processes in violation of legal structures but, said actions are normally between citizens, they are violations in which the State does not interfere directly, only indirectly with the imposition of laws of coexistence.

I believe that the confrontation of the citizen and the State happens in a very abstract form. There isn't a clear concept of illegality in terms of the clash of ideas and with what the government and its institutions represent, the citizen is afraid to directly challenge government institution.

This happens even when the most famous feats of liberation or acts of protests in Puerto Rico have been events with heavy artistic presence: the shooting of U.S. Congress in 1954 and the occupation of The Statute of Liberty in 1977. In Puerto Rico law is broken the same way art is made.

As a direct justification to law breaking, I quote Puerto Rican nationalist and *prócer* Pedro Albizu: "violating the empire's law is abiding the homeland's law". Therefore, the island's political situation and the collective passivity of its population along with the almost null notion of illegality in terms of direct confrontation of the State makes this piece exceedingly suggestive and defiant.

---

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in: RIVERA, NELSON. *op. cit.*.



### **c) Spontaneity in the emergence of artistic manifestations.**

A crucial point in the conception of this piece and the creative process behind it has to do with the spontaneity of the performance's creation. That is to say, any group, no matter the social sector, be it artists or not, can express itself in a spontaneous form.

Spontaneity will always result from individual artistic interests or creative processes repressed by economic, social, cultural or structures. Here is where Antonio Gramsci's idea comes into play. He believed that never in history would there be pure spontaneity because it would coincide with pure mechanistic"<sup>9</sup>. It always depends on a number of facts that facilitate the development of these spontaneous processes; however, many of these manifestations or actions don't leave identifiable documentation.

To the above, and drawing on Antonio Negri, we mention that "spontaneity is not negative; on the contrary, is the result of past experiences and struggles, intelligence turned body and will."<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Once this phenomenon is understood, and after stating our point of views terms of what constitutes the final step in the processes of solidification of horizontal public art, we'll refer to the etymology of "spontaneous". This helps us close on the idea about the necessity of these types of processes in this type of art. Spontaneous comes from the Latin '*sponte*', which means that it makes itself free without external cause. This is where art finds one of its many purposes: being a vehicle for liberty, helping individuals satisfy their necessities based on individual moral conceptions, not based no regulated judgments that homogenize behavior, for consensus to be reached in a collective form.

Some expressions that fit into our idea of spontaneity in public art are "fleeting art" and "ephemeral interventions"; these should take place in a spontaneous and collective form. Generally, these expressions happen in the periphery of art circuits, the have to do more with collective notions or are in reply of certain events.

Said pieces, we believe, have the necessity of being passing, short-lived but frequent. They seek to put social situations on the spotlight and at the same time serve as a

---

<sup>9</sup> GRAMSCI, ANTONIO. *Political Writings, Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires, 1977. pp. 327*

<sup>10</sup> NEGRI, ANTONIO. *Constituent Power. Libertarias, Madrid, 1994. pp. 361*

detonator for a solidarity act. Duque is clear in mentioning that certain actions should have a dose of aggressiveness and sarcasm for them to really become the antidote and reach every layer of the population.<sup>11</sup>

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**ARATO, ANDREW and COHEN, JEAN.** *Public Sphere and Social and Civil Societa in Metapolitics*, vol. 3, N° 9. 1999. pp. 37

**DAGNINO, EVELINA.** *Culture, Citizenship and Democracy: New Discourses and Changing Practices in Latinamerican Left* in Arturo Escobar, Sonia Álvarez and Evelina Dagnino *Cutural Politics and the Culture of Politics. A view of Latinamerican Social Movements*. Taurus, Madrid, 2001. pp.57.

**DIAMOND, Elin.** *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, Londres, 1996.

**DUQUE, FELIX.** *Public Art and Political Space*. Akal, Madrid, 2002.

**GRAMSCI, Antonio.** *Factory Advice, A. Gramsci, Antología*. Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires, 1988.

**LUGO, Dorian.** *Saqueos: Anthology of Cultural Production by Dorián Lugo*. Editorial noexiste, Puerto Rico, 2002

**NEGRI, ANTONIO.** *Constituent Power. Libertarias, Madrid, 1994. pp. 361*

**OLEA, Oscar.** *Urban Art*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico. 1980.

**REVILLA, MARISA.** *The Concept of Social Movement: Action, Identity and Sense in Political Institutions and Society*. Grompone, Romeo (editor). IEP, Lima, 1995.

**RIVERA, Nelson.** *Puerto Rico: Performance and violence, Art and Criminality*. Published in *Saqueos: Anthology of Cultural Production by Dorián Lugo*. Editorial noexiste, Puerto Rico, 2002.

**RODRIGUEZ ARAUJO, Octavio.** *Lefts and Leftisms* . Siglo XXI, Mexico, 2002.

---

<sup>11</sup> **DUQUE, FELIX.** *Public Art and Political Space*. Akal, Madrid, 2002.